

NEW KNOWLEDGE about Poland

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Poland.
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN POLAND

Poland is one of the less diversified societies in Europe. The historical Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania (14th-18th centuries) was a linguistically, ethnically and religiously diverse polity, which also welcomed various ethnic and religious minorities on its territory. During that period, the Commonwealth was a relatively tolerant regime amidst mostly intolerant ones across Europe. In the republic that was resurrected after WWI, religious and ethnic minorities comprised almost one third of the population. It is only after WWII, and as a result of the Holocaust, border changes, and forced population resettlements between Poland, the Soviet Union, and Germany, that the country became practically **homogenous** both ethnically (Poles) and religiously (Roman-Catholics).

The last quarter of the century brought significant changes in attitude towards ethnic and religious minorities. In the process of post-1989 democratic changes, minorities were granted substantial freedom of association and expression. EU integration and membership (2004) served as a catalyst for legislative reforms in the field of religious freedoms as well as ethnic and national minorities' rights in order to meet EU standards.

The Polish understanding of multiculturalism differs significantly from that in other European countries, as it is mainly based on **historical memory**, and refers to the 'golden period' of the Commonwealth. Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity is barely perceptible in everyday life and therefore considered mainly in abstract terms. Undertakings endorsing cultural diversity focus mainly on the popularisation of minorities' customs and celebration of 'exotic' cultures. This leads to a 'folkloristic' understanding of multiculturalism, while the statistical marginality – slowly increasing due to immigration and 'ethnic awakening' of some groups like the Silesians – functions as an excuse for ignorance in this respect. Polish collective consciousness and public discourse are, to a large extent, permeated by an ethnic understanding of the nation and it follows that any form of tolerance of the Others is acceptable only when the dominant group's benefits are secured. It is thus expected that historically present Others (i.e. ethnic minorities) and newcomers (immigrants) have to adapt to the norms, standards, values and practices of the 'host.'

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity are accommodated in **education** and in **political life**. More specifically, we examined:

- The integration of Roma children in schools;
- The ways in which religious pluralism is expressed in schools (ethics classes and presence of religious symbols);
- The Silesian Autonomy Movement as an illustration of minority mobilisation.

Evaluation of discourses and practices of tolerance in our case studies:

	Institutional/legal framework	Practices	Public discourses
Education of Roma children	Tolerance	Minimal tolerance/greeted teeth tolerance/intolerance	Declarative tolerance/ façade tolerance combined with demand for unified cultural standards
Religious pluralism in schools (religious symbols)	Minimal tolerance	Intolerance	Intolerance
Political participation and recognition of minorities (Silesians)	Tolerance	Intolerance at the state level, partial tolerance on the local level	From conditional tolerance to intolerance

TOLERANCE IN POLISH SCHOOLS – ROMA CHILDREN

There is a certain level of inconsistency with respect to Roma education both at the local level and in the central authorities' policies. The government and local authorities finance educational programmes aimed at the Roma community, however, there is no thorough national action plan, therefore, these initiatives have limited results. There continues to be widespread ignorance and insensitivity towards minorities' cultural and educational needs overall, and generalised negative stereotypes with respect to the Roma hamper most attempts at improving children's education. As a result, alienated Roma often drop out of school before even completing the elementary level of education.

As noted above, there is a commonly shared opinion (popular also among the establishment) that **minorities should accept the majority's standards and assimilate to the dominant culture**, especially as there are so few. Thus it could be argued that the aforementioned educational programmes targeting the Roma are more procedural than substantive initiatives, mostly taken to prevent possible accusations of intolerance or discrimination.

In the opinion of most educators, official state education requirements should apply equally to all regardless of their background. Teachers and administrators that we interviewed for the ACCEPT PLURALISM project noted that they did not seriously consider any alternative to the **enforcement of universally applicable rules to all children, regardless of their origin or nationality**. Occasional departures from the standard should only depend on the benevolence of local officials and teachers, and even such 'concession' was considered rather improper. It is interesting to note that this position was not considered as being in conflict with their understanding of assumed trans-historical Polish tolerance.

Grass-root initiatives aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of the education system are more promising, because they take into account various local contexts, possibilities, needs and people's expectations. Trans-regional **cooperation** between municipal institutions, policy makers, volunteers and NGO activists, especially those from Roma NGOs, geared towards improving educational solutions that accommodate minority needs is particularly relevant here. Such initiatives could **promote new ideas and teach much needed skills to local education professionals**, such as effective teaching methods for children of non-Polish background, and practical skills in dealing with multi-ethnic and multicultural groups of students. Overall, classes **promoting multiculturalism and civic education** should be introduced into school curricula at all levels of education, while social campaigns advocating **tolerance** nation-wide are also required.

TOLERANCE IN POLISH SCHOOLS – RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Crucifixes reappeared in Polish public schools after 1989. Changes in social consciousness and norms combined with wider EU discussions and legal cases concerning the role of religious symbols in public schools triggered a general discussion on the presence of the Roman-Catholic Church in Polish public life, and of Christian symbols in the public space.

The rare attempts that have been made to promote a more secular public sphere, have faced a powerful and well-organised group of religious authorities, eagerly supported by religious 'fundamentalists' and seconded by the silent majority –essentially indifferent to the issue but de facto accepting of the existing status quo. Simultaneously, students' acceptance towards religious education and crosses hanging on classrooms' walls mirror the character of prevalent **religiosity** in Poland, many times diagnosed as **ritualistic**, and the perception of **Christianity (Roman-Catholicism) as being 'innately' embedded in the nation's tradition** and therefore an indispensable part of its **identity**.

For those supporting or merely accepting the current state of affairs, the history and status of Roman-Catholicism and the Roman-Catholic Church fully justifies its tacit presence in public education (religious classes) and the public space (crosses in schools, hospitals, and the Parliament). There is very limited public criticism of the dominant presence of the Roman-Catholic Church in the public education system, and initiatives that have been taken to implement liberal ideals and secular principles have had a very restricted impact. Claims that have been voiced in favour of respect for pluralism in public life, are discarded on the basis of a concern that **'exaggerated' tolerance may endanger national integrity**.

In general, intolerance towards individuals and groups demanding removal of crucifixes and religious lessons can be witnessed. Such requests in favour of the secular character of the state and religious neutrality in the public space, essentially go unheard. **In some cases, even intolerance towards such demands has been openly expressed.**

TOLERANCE IN POLISH POLITICAL LIFE

The Silesian minority, a group claiming of being neither Poles nor Germans, is not officially recognised as a minority, but it has grown significantly in size – from 173,000 in 2002 to more than 800,000 in 2012. The Silesian Autonomy Movement won seats in the local parliament in 2010, and became part of the ruling coalition in Upper Silesia. This event provoked a nationwide one on the country's **political constitution** and what this meant for the Polish nation. For some nationalists, the success of the Silesian activists posed a **threat to the nation's cohesion**. In short, the visibility of the Silesian minority in Polish political life was not a welcome development.

Unlike formally recognised minorities such as the Roma or Ukrainians, Silesians have already accomplished some political goals, and in this, they resemble the German minority in the neighbouring Oppeln region. This accomplishment raised concerns and fears among the mainstream political elites. Minority organisations and their participation in Polish political life is thus constantly questioned. At the same time however, this matter draws public attention only intermittently – from election to election, and from census to census.

Overall, there is a basic **lack of tolerance** at the state level and only a partial expression of tolerance at the local level towards the identity-based activity of Silesians and the political manifestations of their demands. All in all, titular nation-centred perspectives are favoured in the public discourse and there is little room for an equal participation of minorities in the public life. Limiting the access of minorities to public debates and restricting their political participation

demonstrates a general lack of support for minorities' efforts to participate in the public life as equal partners. The case of the Silesian minority invites the notion of **hierarchical pluralism**. In this kind of arrangement, one deals with a formal political plurality, but in fact one group is dominant and defines the norms. The Polish majority not only assigns to itself the right to set the standards, but it also fiercely resists any attempt to redefine the existing power relations, the understanding of tolerance and of what can be tolerated in the country's public and political life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our empirical research in Poland's educational system and political life suggests a significant degree of intolerance. This intolerance is similar to a 'gritted teeth tolerance' with regard to the presence of ethnically or religiously distinct persons and groups in the public sphere. At the same time, this kind of intolerance rarely translates into open physical aggression or acts of discrimination; it is confined to verbal and other symbolic forms. Dominated minorities, subjugated to the rules dictated by the majority, act timidly and often refrain from overtly voicing their desires and demands.

It is difficult to identify widespread and popular attitudes, policies and discourses displaying attributes identified in this project as signs of acceptance or recognition of minorities by the majority. Small, piecemeal changes, initiated sporadically at a grassroots level, have seldom succeed in influencing state policies, the habits of the majority's representatives, or the essence of mainstream discourses. However, progress that could be achieved through harmonization with EU regulations and fair policy recommendations are frequently diluted at the local level by ordinary people who share images infused by an ethnic concept of the nation and respective representation of the preordained cultural order.

Our research suggests that the liberal concept of tolerance has only a limited application in the Polish case and it needs to be contextualised and informed by the history of the region, marked by strong competitions between national groups and by communist regime politics, propelled by the dogma of social uniformity. This insight may contribute to the elaboration of a less normative concept of tolerance and pluralism. It does not mean that the situation in the region is static and liberal tolerance does not infiltrate societies' consciousness, or that the existing order is not constantly challenged. Pluralisation of public life and the empowerment of Polish civil society are clearly gaining momentum and hint that a cultural convergence is underway. This allows a dose of optimism for the future.

FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

Tolerance of Cultural Diversity in Poland and Its Limitations

by Michał Buchowski and Katarzyna Chlewińska (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/24381>

Other relevant publications include:

2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

	PROJECT IDENTITY
Acronym	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Authors	Michał Buchowski and Katarzyna Chlewińska, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
Web site	www.accept-pluralism.eu
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Coordinator	European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
Scientific Coordinator	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer	Ms. Louisa Anastopoulou, Directorate General for Research and Innovation, European Commission